

The Exhaustion of Doubt

by Ajahn Chah

A talk given by Ajahn Chah at Wat Nanachat in 1977

What's important is not staying or going, but our thinking. So all of you, please work together, cooperate and live in harmony. This should be the legacy you create here at Wat Pah Nanachat Bung Wai, the International Forest Monastery of Bung Wai District. Don't let it become Wat Pah Woon Wai, the Forest Monastery of Confusion and Trouble (one of AC's favorite plays on words). Whoever comes to stay here should be helping create this legacy.

The way I see it, the laypeople are providing robes material, almsfood, the dwelling place, and medicines in appropriate measure. It's true that they are simple country folk, but they support you out of their faith as best they can. Don't get carried away with your ideas of how you think they should be, such as, "Oh, I try to teach these laypeople, but they make me upset. Today is the observance day, and they came to take precepts. Then tomorrow they'll go casting their fishing nets. They'll drink their whiskey. They do these things right out there where anyone can see. Then the next observance day, they'll come again. They'll take the precepts and listen to the Dharma talk again, and then they'll go to put out their nets again, kill animals again, and drink again."

You can get pretty upset thinking like this. You'll think that your activities with the laypeople don't bring any benefit at all. Today they take the precepts, and tomorrow they go cast the fishing nets. A monk without much wisdom might get discouraged and feel he's failed, thinking his work bears no fruit. But it's not that his efforts have no result; it's those laypeople who get no result. Of course there is some good result from making efforts at virtue. So when there is such a situation and we start to suffer over it, what should we do?

We contemplate within ourselves to recognize that our good intentions have brought some benefit and do have meaning. It's just that the spiritual faculties of those people aren't developed. They aren't strong yet.

That's how it is for now, so we patiently continue to advise them. If we just give up on such people, they are likely to become worse than they now are. If we keep at it, they may come to maturity one day and recognize their unskillful actions. Then they will feel some remorse and start to be ashamed of doing such things.

Right now, they have the faith to support us with material offerings, giving us our requisites for living. I've considered this: it's quite a big deal. It's no small thing. Donating our food, our dwellings, the medicines to treat our illnesses, is not a small thing. We are practicing for the attainment of Nirvana. If we don't have any food to eat, that will be pretty difficult. How would we sit in meditation? How would we be able to build this monastery?

We should recognize when people's spiritual faculties are not yet mature. So what should we do? We are like people selling medicine. You've probably seen or heard them driving around with their loudspeakers touting the different medicines they have for different maladies. People who have bad headaches or poor digestion might come to buy.

We can accept money from those who buy our medicine; we don't take money from someone who doesn't buy anything. We can feel glad about the people who do buy something. If others stay in their houses and don't come out to buy, we shouldn't get angry with them for that. We shouldn't criticize them.

If we teach people but they can't practice properly, we shouldn't be getting angry with them. Don't do that! Don't criticize them, but rather keep on instructing them and leading them along. Whenever their faculties have ripened sufficiently, then they will want to do it. Just like when we are selling medicine, we just keep on doing our business. When people have ailments that trouble them, they will buy. Those who don't see a need to buy medicine probably aren't suffering from any such conditions. So never mind.

Keeping at it with this attitude, these problems will be done with. There were such situations in the Buddha's time too. We want to do it right, but somehow we can't get there yet; it means that our own faculties are not sufficiently mature. Our spiritual perfections (parami) are not complete. It's like fruit that's still growing on the tree. If you want to force it to be sweet, you can't. It's still unripe, it's small and sour, simply because it hasn't finished growing. You can't force it to be bigger, to be sweet, to be ripe—you have to let it ripen according to its nature. As time passes and things change, people may come to spiritual maturity. As time passes, the fruit will grow and ripen and become sweet of its own. With such an attitude, you can be at ease. But if you are impatient and dissatisfied, if

you keep asking, “Why isn’t this mango sweet yet? Why is it sour?” when it isn’t ripe, then what can be done? It’s still sour because it’s not ripe. That’s the nature of fruit.

The people in the world are like that. It makes me think of the Buddha’s teaching about four kinds of lotus. Some are still in the mud, some have grown out of the mud and are in the water, some are at the surface of the water, and some have come out of the water and bloomed. So the Buddha was able to give his teachings to so many various beings, because he understood their different levels of spiritual development. We should think about this and not feel oppressed by what happens here. Just consider yourselves to be like someone selling medicine. Your responsibility is to advertise it and make it available. If someone gets sick, they are likely to come and buy it. Likewise, if people’s spiritual faculties mature sufficiently, one day they are likely to develop faith. It’s not something we can force them to do. Seeing it in this way, we will be OK.

Living here is certainly meaningful. It’s not something without benefit. All of you, please practice together harmoniously and amicably. When you experience obstacles and suffering, recollect the virtues of the Buddha. What was the knowledge the Buddha realized? What did the Buddha teach? What does the Dharma point out? How does the Sangha practice? Constantly recollecting the qualities of the Three Jewels brings a lot of benefit.

Whether you are Thais or people from other countries is not important. It’s important to maintain harmony and work together. People come from all over to visit this monastery. When folks come to Wat Pah Pong, I urge them to come here, to see the monastery, to practice here. It’s a legacy you are creating. It seems that the populace have faith and are gladdened by it. So don’t forget yourselves. You should be leading people rather than being led by them. Make your best efforts to practice well and establish yourselves firmly, and the good results will come.

Are there any doubts about practice you need to resolve now?

Q: When the mind isn’t thinking much, but is in a sort of dark and dull state, is there something we should do to brighten it? Or should we just sit with it?

AC: Is this all the time, or when you are sitting in meditation? What exactly is this darkness like? Is it a lack of wisdom?

Q: When I sit to meditate, I don’t get drowsy, but my mind feels dark, sort of dense or opaque.

AC: So you would like to make your mind have wisdom, right? Change your posture, and do a lot of walking meditation. That’s one thing to do. You can walk for three hours at a time, until you’re really tired.

Q: I do walking meditation a couple of hours a day, and I usually have a lot of thinking when I do it. But what really concerns me is this dark state when I sit. Should I just try to be aware of it and let go, or is there some means I should use to counter it?

AC: I think maybe your postures aren’t balanced. When you walk, you have a lot of thinking. So you should do a lot of discursive contemplation, then the mind can retreat from thinking. It won’t stick there. But never mind. For now, increase the time you spend on walking meditation. Focus on that. Then if the mind is wandering, pull it out and do some contemplation, such as investigation of the body. Have you ever done that continuously, rather than as an occasional reflection?

When you experience this dark state, do you suffer over it?

Q: I feel frustrated because of my state of mind--I’m not developing samadhi or wisdom.

AC: When you have this condition of mind, the suffering comes about because of not knowing. There is doubt as to why the mind is like this. The important principle in meditation is that whatever occurs, don’t be in doubt over it. Doubt just adds to the suffering. If the mind is bright and awake, don’t doubt that. It’s a condition of mind. If it’s dark and dull, don’t doubt about that. Just continue to practice diligently without getting caught up in reactions to that state. Taking note and being aware of that state, don’t have doubts about it. It is just what it is. When you entertain doubts and start grasping at it and giving it meaning, then it is dark.

As you do your practice, these states are things you encounter as you progress along. You needn’t have doubts about them. Notice them with awareness, and keep letting go.

How about sleepiness? Is your sitting more sleepy or awake?

(no reply)

Maybe it’s hard to recall if you’ve been sleepy! If this happens, meditate with your eyes open. Don’t close them. Instead, you can focus your gaze on one point, such as the light of a candle. Don’t close your eyes! This is one way to remove the hindrance of drowsiness.

When you're sitting, you can close your eyes from time to time, and if the mind is clear, without drowsiness, you can then continue to sit with your eyes closed. If it's dull and sleepy, open your eyes and focus on the one point. It's similar to kasina meditation. Doing this, you can make the mind awake and tranquil. The sleepy mind isn't tranquil; it's obscured by hindrance and it's in darkness.

We should talk about sleep also. You can't simply go without sleep. That's the nature of the body. If you're meditating and you get unbearably, completely sleepy, then let yourself sleep. That's also one way to quell the hindrance when it's overwhelming you.

Otherwise, you practice along, keeping the eyes open if you have this tendency to get drowsy. Close your eyes after a while and check your state of mind. If it's clear, you can practice with eyes closed. Then after some time you take a rest. Some people are always fighting against sleep. They force themselves not to sleep, and the result is that when they sit, they are always drifting off to sleep and falling over themselves, sitting in an unaware state.

Q: Can we focus on the tip of the nose?

AC: That's fine. Whatever suits you, whatever you feel comfortable with and helps you fix your mind, focus on that.

It's like this: in teaching meditation, if we get attached to the ideals and take the guidelines too literally, it can be difficult to understand. When doing a standard meditation, such as anapanasati, first we should make the determination that right now, we are going to do this practice, and we take anapanasati as our foundation. We turn our attention to only focusing on the breath, at three points, as it passes through the nostrils, the chest, and the abdomen. When the air enters, it first passes the nose, then through the chest, then to the end point of the abdomen. As it leaves the body, the beginning is the abdomen, the middle is the chest, and the end is the nose.

We merely note it. This is a way to start controlling the mind, tying awareness to these points at the beginning, middle, and end of the inhalations and exhalations.

Before we begin, we should sit and let the mind relax first. It's similar to doing something like sewing on a machine. When we are learning to use the sewing machine, first we just sit in front of the machine to get familiar with it and feel comfortable. Here, we just sit and breathe. Not fixing awareness on anything, we merely take note that we are breathing. We take note of whether the breath is relaxed or not and how long or short it is. Having noticed this, then we begin focusing on the inhalation and exhalation at the three points.

We practice like this until we become skilled in it and it is going smoothly. Then the next stage is to focus awareness only on the sensation of the breath at the tip of the nose or the upper lip. At this point we aren't concerned with whether the breath is long or short, but only focus on the sensation of entering and exiting.

There may be different phenomena contacting the senses, or thoughts arising. This is called initial thought (vitakka). It brings up some idea, be it about the nature of compounded phenomena (sankhara), about the world, or whatever. Once the mind has brought it up, the mind will want to get involved and merge with it. If it's an object that is wholesome, then let the mind take it up. If it is something unwholesome, stop it immediately. If it is something wholesome, then let the mind contemplate on it, and gladness, satisfaction, and happiness will come about. The mind will be bright and clear as the breath goes in and out, these initial thoughts appear, and the mind takes them up. Then it becomes discursive thought (vicara). The mind develops familiarity with the object, exerting itself and merging with it. At this point, there is no sleepiness.

After an appropriate period of this, take your attention back to the breath. Then as you continue on, there will be the initial thought and discursive thought, initial thought and discursive thought. If you are contemplating skillfully on an object such as the nature of sankhara, then the mind will experience deeper tranquility, and rapture is born. There is the vitakka and vicara, and that leads to happiness of mind. At this time, there won't be any dullness or drowsiness. The mind won't be dark, if we practice like this. It will be gladdened and enraptured.

This rapture will start to diminish and disappear after a while, so you can take up the initial thought again. The mind will become firm and certain with it, undistracted. Then you go on to discursive thought again, the mind becoming one with it. When you are practicing a meditation that suits your temperament and doing it well, then whenever you take up the object, rapture will come about, the hairs of the body standing on end, the mind enraptured and satiated.

When it's like this, there can't be any dullness or drowsiness. You won't have any doubts. Back and forth between initial and discursive thought, initial and discursive thought, over and over again, and rapture comes. Then there is bliss (sukha).

This takes place in sitting practice. After sitting for a while, you can get up and do walking meditation. The mind can be the same in the walking. Not sleepy, it has the vitakka and vicara, vitakka and vicara, then rapture. There

won't be any of the hindrances (nivarana: desire, anger, restlessness and agitation, sloth and torpor, doubt), and the mind will be unstained. Whatever takes place, never mind; you don't need to doubt about any experiences you may have, be they of light, of bliss, or whatever. Don't entertain doubts about these conditions of mind. If the mind is dark, if the mind is illumined, don't fixate on these conditions, don't be attached to them. Let go, discard them. Keep walking, keep noting what is taking place, without getting bound or infatuated. Don't suffer over these conditions of mind. Don't have doubts about them. They are just what they are, following the way of mental phenomena. Sometimes the mind will be joyful. Sometimes it will be sorrowful. There can be happiness or suffering, there can be obstruction. Rather than doubting, understand that conditions of mind are like this, and that whatever manifests is coming about due to causes ripening. At this moment, this condition is manifesting—that's what you should recognize. Even if the mind is dark, you don't need to be upset over that. If it becomes bright, don't be excessively gladdened by that. Don't have doubts about these conditions of mind, or about your reactions to them.

Do your walking meditation until you are really tired, then sit. When you sit, determine your mind to do it; don't just be playing around. If you get sleepy, open your eyes and focus on some object. Walk until the mind separates itself from thoughts and is still, then sit. If you are clear and awake, you can close your eyes. If you get sleepy again, open your eyes and look at an object.

Don't try to do this all day and all night. When you're in need of sleep, let yourself sleep. Just as with our food: once a day we eat. The time comes, and we give food to the body. The need for sleep is the same. When the time comes, give it some rest. When you've had an appropriate rest, get up. Don't let the mind languish in dullness, but get up and get to work—start practicing. Do a lot of walking meditation. If you walk slowly and the mind becomes dull, then walk fast. Learn to find the right pace for yourself.

Q: Are vitakka and vicara the same?

AC: You're sitting and suddenly the thought of someone pops into your head—that's vitakka, the initial thought. Then you take that idea of the person and start thinking about them (in detail). Vitakka is picking it up, vicara is investigating it.

For example, we pick up (the idea of) death, and then we start considering it: "I will die, others will die, every living being will die, when they die where will they go...?" "Stop! Stop and bring it up again. When it gets running like that, stop it again, then go back to mindfulness of the breath. Sometimes the discursive thought will wander off and not come back, so you have to stop it. Keep at it until the mind is bright and clear.

If you practice vicara with an object that you are suited to, you may experience your hairs standing on end, tears pouring from your eyes, a state of extreme delight, many different things as rapture comes.

Q: Can this happen with any kind of thinking, or is it in a state of tranquility that it happens?

AC: It's when the mind is tranquil. It's not ordinary mental proliferation. You sit with a calm mind and then the initial thought comes. For example, I think of my brother who just passed away. Or I might think of some other relatives. This is when the mind is tranquil—the tranquility isn't something certain, but for the moment the mind is tranquil. After this initial thought comes, then I go into discursive thought. If it's a line of thinking that's skillful and wholesome, it leads to ease of mind and happiness, and then there is rapture, with its attendant experiences. This rapture came from the initial and discursive thinking that took place in a state of calmness. We don't have to give it names such as first jhana, second jhana, and so forth. We just call it tranquility.

The next factor is bliss (sukha). Eventually, we drop the initial and discursive thinking as tranquility deepens. Why is that? The state of mind is becoming more refined and subtle. Vitakka and vicara are relatively coarse, and they will vanish. There will remain just the rapture, accompanied by bliss and one-pointedness of mind. And when it reaches full measure, there won't be anything—(there is equanimity, and) the mind is empty. That's absorption concentration.

We don't need to fixate or dwell on any of these experiences. They will naturally progress from one to the next. At first there are initial and discursive thought, rapture, bliss, and one-pointedness. Then initial and discursive thinking are discarded, leaving rapture, bliss, and one-pointedness. Rapture is discarded (note: the suttas usually say, "with the fading of rapture..."), then bliss, and finally only one-pointedness and equanimity remain. It means the mind is becoming more and more tranquil, and its objects are steadily decreasing, until there is nothing but one-pointedness and equanimity.

When the mind is tranquil and focused, this can happen. It is the power of mind, the state of the mind that has attained tranquility. When it's like this, there won't be any sleepiness. It can't enter the mind; it will disappear. And the other hindrances of sensual desire, aversion, doubt, and restlessness and agitation won't be present. Though they may still exist (latent) in the mind of the meditator, they won't occur at this time.

Q: Should we be closing our eyes so as to shut out the external environment, or should we just deal with things as we see them? Is it important whether we open or close the eyes?

AC: When we are training newly, it's important to avoid too much sensory input, so it's better to close the eyes. Not seeing objects that can distract and affect us, we build up the mind's strength. When the mind is strong, then we can open the eyes, and whatever we see won't sway us. Open or closed won't matter.

When you rest, you normally close your eyes. Sitting in meditation with eyes closed is the dwelling place for a practitioner. We find enjoyment and rest in it. This is an important fundamental for us. But when we can't close our eyes, will we be able to deal with things? We sit with eyes closed and we profit from that. When we open our eyes, we can handle whatever we meet; things won't get out of hand—we won't be at a loss. But basically we are just handling things. It's when we go back to our sitting that we really develop greater wisdom.

This is how we develop the practice. When it reaches fulfillment, then it doesn't matter whether we open or close our eyes, it will be the same. The mind won't change or deviate. At all times of the day, morning, noon, or night, the state of mind will be the same. We dwell thus. There is nothing that can shake the mind. When happiness arises, we recognize, "It's not certain," and it passes. Unhappiness arises and we recognize, "It's not certain," and that's that. You get the idea that you want to disrobe—this is not certain. But you think it's certain. Before you wanted to ordain, and you were so sure about that. Now you are sure you want to disrobe. It's all uncertain, but you don't see it because of your darkness of mind. Your mind is telling you lies: "being here, I'm just wasting time." If you disrobe and go back to the world, won't you waste time there? You don't think about that. Disrobing to work in the fields and gardens, to grow beans or raise pigs and goats, won't that be a waste of time?

There was once a large pond full of fish. As time passed, the rainfall decreased and the pond became shallow. One day a bird showed up at the edge of the pond. He told the fish, "I really feel sorry for you fish. Here you barely have enough water to keep your backs wet. Do you know that not very far from here there's a big lake, several meters deep, where the fish swim happily?"

When the fish in that shallow pond heard this, they got excited. They said to the bird, "It sounds good. But how could we get there?"

The bird said, "No problem. I can carry you in my bill, one at a time."

The fish

discussed it among themselves. "It's not so great here anymore. The water doesn't even cover our heads. We ought to go." So they lined up to be taken by the bird.

The bird took one fish at a time. As soon as he got out of sight of the pond, he landed and ate the fish. Then he would return to the pond and tell them, "Your friend is right this moment swimming happily in the lake, and he asks when you will be joining him!"

It sounded great to the fish. They couldn't wait to go, and they started pushing to get to the head of the line.

The bird finished off the fish like that. He went back to the pond to see if he could find any more. There was only one crab there. The bird started his sales pitch about the lake.

The crab was somewhat skeptical. He asked the bird how he could get there. The bird told him he would carry him in his bill. But this crab had some wisdom. He told the bird, "Let's do it like this: I'll sit on your back, with my arms around your neck. If you try any tricks, I'll choke you with my claws."

The bird was frustrated by this, but he gave it a try, thinking he might still somehow get to eat the crab. So the crab got on his back, and they took off.

The bird flew around, looking for a good place to land. But as soon as he tried to descend, the crab started squeezing his throat with his claws. The bird couldn't even cry out—he just made a dry, croaking sound. So in the end he had to give up and return the crab to the pond.

I hope you can have the wisdom of the crab! If you are like those fish, you will listen to the voices that tell you how wonderful everything will be if you go back to the world. That's an obstacle ordained people meet with. Please be careful about this.

Q: Why is it that unpleasant states of mind are difficult to see clearly, while pleasant states are easy to see? When I experience happiness or pleasure, I can see that it's something impermanent, but when I'm unhappy, that's harder to see.

AC: You are thinking in terms of your attraction and aversion and trying to figure it out, but actually, delusion is the predominant root. You feel that unhappiness is hard to see while happiness is easy to see. That's just the way your afflictions work: Aversion is hard to let go of, right? It's a strong feeling. Happiness is easy to let go of. It's not really easy; it's just that it's not so overpowering. Pleasure and happiness are things people like and feel comfortable with—they're not so easy to let go of. Aversion is painful, but people don't know how to let go of it.

The truth is that they are equal. When you contemplate thoroughly and get to the point, you will quickly recognize that they're equal. If you had a scale to weigh them, their weight would be the same. But we incline towards the pleasurable.

So are you saying that you can let go of happiness easily, while unhappiness is difficult to let go of? And you think that the things we like are easy to give up, but you're wondering why the things we dislike are hard to give up-but if they're not good, why are they hard to give up? It's not like that. Think anew-they are completely equal. It's just that we don't incline to them equally. When there is unhappiness, we feel bothered, and we want it to go away quickly, so we feel it's hard to get rid of. Happiness doesn't usually bother us, so we are friends with it and we feel we can let go of it easily. It's not like that; it's not oppressing and squeezing our hearts, that's all. Unhappiness oppresses us. We think one has more value or weight than the other, but in truth they are equal. It's like heat and cold. We can be burned to death by fire. We can also be frozen stiff by cold, and we die just the same. Neither is greater than the other. Happiness and suffering are like this, but in our thinking we give them different value.

Or take praise and criticism. Do you feel that praise is easy to let go of, and criticism is hard to let go of? They really are equal. But when we are praised, we don't feel disturbed; we are pleased, but it's not a sharp feeling. Criticism is painful, so we feel it's hard to let go of. Being pleased is also hard to let go of, but we are partial to it so we don't have the same desire to get rid of it quickly. The delight we take in being praised and the sting we feel when criticized are equal. They are the same. But when our minds meet these things, we have unequal reactions to them. We don't mind being close to some of them.

Please understand this. In our meditation we will meet with the arising of all sorts of mental afflictions. The correct outlook is to be ready to let go of all of it, whether pleasant or painful. Even though happiness is something we desire and suffering is something we don't desire, we recognize they are of equal value. These are things that we will experience.

Happiness is wished for by people in the world. Suffering is not wished for. Nirvana is something beyond wishing or not wishing. Do you understand? There is no wishing involved in Nirvana. Wanting to get happiness, wanting to be free of suffering, wanting to transcend happiness and suffering-there are none of these things. It is peace.

As I see it, realizing the truth doesn't happen by relying on others. You should understand that all doubts will be resolved by our own efforts, by continuous, energetic practice. We won't get free of doubt by asking others. We will end doubt through our own unrelenting efforts.

Remember this! It is an important principle in practice. The actual doing is what will instruct you. You will come to know all right and wrong. "The Brahmin shall reach the exhaustion of doubt through unceasing practice." Wherever we go, it doesn't matter--everything can still be resolved through our own ceaseless efforts. But we can't stick with it. We can't bear the difficulties we meet, and we find it hard to face up to our suffering and not try to run away from it. If we do face it and bear with it, then we gain knowledge, and the practice starts instructing us automatically, teaching us about right and wrong and the way things really are. If our thinking is wrong, our practice will show us the fault and ill result of that of itself. It really happens like this. But it's hard to find people who can see it through. Everyone wants instant awakening. Rushing here and there following your impulses, you only end up worse off for it. Be careful about this.

Source : <http://www.abhayagiri.org>